

the sea shares salt with the breeze

LESVOS, GREECE 2015

by Becky Thompson



Photo by Becky Thompson

≈ Before light

Four in the morning,
a buzzing alerts me to the sea,
scanning for a black raft

until heads pop up,
their arms opening,
as my waving reaches theirs.

Hungry rocks eat the bottom
of their raft, as a father
lifts his newborn to Allah

his wife's face
holding birth and death
on the Aegean sea.

≈ Between Petra and Kalloni

Six hours into climbing
four children and ten adults
gather under an eastern strawberry tree

its thin skin shed in long strips
to reveal a silky
textured surface.

We drink water
and contemplate its beauty
loading up my bike again,

one child on the front rack,
another on the back,
handlebars carrying cucumbers and apricots.

≈ On the 21st century underground railroad

After thirty-nine days of night travel,
knees scabbed over from crawling
across another border

to early morning rocking
on the perilous sea,
an Afghan family walks

up the winding road
to an airless room
next to an empty police station.

They spread a blanket over a filthy floor,
laying their infants down like
tired dandelions drenched in sun.

At dawn, we straggle up another twisted road
until a Greek farmer shelters us
in a van with tinted windows

In Mytilini the family single files
into the arrest line
as I turn to find my ride.

≈ Aftermath

In Facing It, Komunyakaa
can barely touch the memorial,
his image a prism sparkling blood.

Now, after months
of welcoming rafts,

my body a statue filled with tears
I carry an image
of a young man
in Kara Tepe observing Salat
sewage running
like an avenue beside him
children crouching with sticks.
I can barely touch night and day.
There are no numbers
to figure this out,
one million at the border,
two million waiting to cross,
three million in transit,
four million walking,
five million praying,
six million the number
killed in the Holocaust.
Germany now the refugees' goal,
this calculus too much to fathom.

≈ Among the missing persons reports

In the Athens airport
I scan faces for Syrian families
wondering if anyone made it
over the two day climb,
past Moria's barbed wire,
to find air travel from an imperial source.
Northern Europeans settle in,
frequent flyers
with unearned miles.

≈ In sight of the sacred

Elie Wiesel asked
if god died
in Auschwitz?
The six-year-old says no
as he fills a baseball cap
with cool water from the fountain;
says no, the man in the wheelchair
whose school friends
push him up the mountain;

says no, the mother
with a machete mangled leg,
who collapsed on the beach,
then hoisted herself up,
dressing her daughter
in a pink Madeline hat;
says no, the family who outsmarted
the smugglers, found their own raft
snuck under the radar;
says no, the goddess of mercy
moonlighting her van
for a mother in labor;
says no, the elder
who ran along side my car,
placing his only blue stone ring on my finger.

≈ Since returning

Seeing babies in strollers
is the hardest
as they cry and laugh.
My mind lapses
to babies who can't cry
even in hunger,
sleeping with their eyes open
limbs twitching.
On the day before my leaving,
a grandmother reached over
to feel my heart,
her hand cradling my ribs,
my body barely able
to take in that love.
In Greek, xenos
means foreigner and guest.
I am a visitor now,
the easy stroll, uncomfortable.
In the night
I wake
my heart folded in
not knowing if I am on a raft
waiting for a raft
or hovering above.

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When I arrived with friends in Lesvos in April 2015, my sabbatical intention was to work with the elder yogini Angela Farmer on a writing project. On the first day, traveling along a beach road, I was greeted by a contingent of Syrian university students who had just made it across the Aegean Sea, almost dying after their raft had capsized. They motioned with their hands, explaining how they made their bodies quiet and aligned to keep the raft as steady as possible. For the next months, we joined Greeks and tourists in doing whatever we could to care for those arriving. We held shivering babies, shared food, walked up mountain passes, and listened. In April and May, I wrote as much as I could for the international press since there was virtually no information available about what was quickly becoming the biggest refugee crisis since World War II. Once reporters began to arrive, I turned to writing poetry. Words were bleeding out of me in the middle of the night, often reminding me of Alice Walker's blessing in her recent book, *The Cushion in the Road*, "A writer's heart, a poet's heart, an artist's heart, a musician's heart, is always breaking. It is through that broken window that we see the world; more mysterious, beloved, insane and precious for the sparkling and jagged edges of the smaller enclosure we have escaped."

Many times in Lesvos I found myself grateful for the extraordinary beauty of the island: the expanse of the Aegean Sea wrapping the coast; the insistent wildflowers; the hills shaped like breasts. Where we were staying happened to be at the center of the vortex for the rafts. There was a direct line between the coastline in Turkey where the smugglers sent the rafts off and a soft part on the beach in front of our guesthouse that was protected from the big rocks further up and down the coast. Many days, the rafts came so directly toward me that I felt a magnet between us—a loving presence pull-

ing families toward my heart. In the evenings, as I walked from Molyvos back to Eftalou, I prayed to the island's beauty, thanking it for absorbing some of war's pain. Since returning to the US, I find myself staring at big trees, asking for shelter, wondering if people I walked with there are finding kind trees now in Hungary, in Serbia, in stops along their silent ways.

Since being back, much feels unreal. Air-conditioned buses. Single-wrapped slices of cheese. The easy violence on TV. I feel smaller here. Shorter. I find myself returning to careful steps of conscious eating. I am moved to tack down moments of sensation. It feels like I am returning from a war except I saw no bombs or gunfire. I felt war in the air and saw war in people's faces—the specter of war arrived on boats and in the brave steps from rafts into shore waters. The violence is here as well. I pass by three street memorials adorning light posts within a few blocks of the YMCA in Boston where I teach yoga. More arrests followed protests one year after Michael Brown's murder, and activists learned that the tear gas used by police against nonviolent protesters in Ferguson was the same brand used by Israeli military against the people of Palestine.

I am not sure how to hold all of this insanity in my body or who to call myself now after what I have witnessed as a white citizen of the US. In his essay "Please Call Me By My True Names," Thich Nhat Hanh becomes one with that which he witnesses. He is a bud, a jewel, a mayfly. He is the twelve-year-old girl who was raped at sea and jumped into the ocean with her pain. He is the pirate who raped her. He is the witness. He is all of them. I am an individually wrapped American. The newborn on a raft. A sniper in Syria. A woman from a Mormon family whose family fled persecution across a dangerous ocean one hundred and fifty years ago.

In the mornings since returning, I haven't been able to get to the meditation cushion. It feels too far, too alone. Meditation in my bed somehow feels safer as I listen for the earliest bird, the flight pattern of planes from Logan airport to the west, the buzzing sadness in my ears, the rafts chanting, the thump of the morning paper on my porch that brings news of the Lesvos shore where I am, now, not standing.

My activist daughter, Crystal Rizzo, who is the educational director at the North American Indian Center of Boston, wonders why I am going so far from home to greet refugees. There is so much to do here in the US, particularly as the Obama administration has been paying the government of Mexico tens of millions of dollars to block the exodus of families fleeing for their lives from Central America through Mexico. Obama has now outsourced a draconian foreign policy to Mexico, whose land the US stole in 1848. I reach back to the months of talking with refugees in Greece. All of them, even those with immediate family members in the US, told me that all attempts to come to the US had been denied. Now, as I plan to go back to Greece, I wonder what happened to my decades of support for the slogan, "think global, act local." I wonder still now about my decades of hesitation about activists going to save the world when there is so much to be done in the US.

But some time and space coordinate shifted inside of me this year. My heart has taken the name of world citizen. My responsibility and my belonging are much bigger than before. Small embraces along my journey have changed me. A group of teenagers, trying to teach me some Arabic expressions, asked me to recite after them what sounded to me like a long, loving prayer. After I bumbled through, they pronounced me "Muslim." I had, unbeknownst to me, just said an initiation prayer, which, to me, was an honor. In



Photo of Jude by Becky Thompson

Mytilini on my last trip to the camp, a Syrian elder I had been with a few weeks before slipped his only ring on my finger, and then another elder did the same. As I cried uncontrollably, unsure how it would be humanly possible to leave his family, maybe forever, another elder came to my car, reached in and held my cheeks, and assured me it would be okay. Their courage is my banister. Their love, my forever talisman. My heart expanded in their presence. I expanded my own borders somehow between the raft carrying Pakistani teenagers and the rafts with Palestinian and Somali and Syrian families. My spirit has stretched somewhere between learning to distinguish between the sound of an aging refrigerator and an early morning raft engine and holding the hands of an elder woman with Parkinson's who stopped shaking once our fingers were intertwined.

Since being back, I have been trying to connect with as many Afghan, Syrian, Somali, Palestinian, Iraqi, and Iranian activist groups as possible. Re-

alizing the range of people on the rafts to Greece, who then walk the hundreds of miles into Europe together seems to offer a model for coalition, building here. What if the ties among immigrant groups here could be as intimate as the ties the refugees have needed to create among each other during their perilous journeys? As we walked up the mountain pass from Molyvos to Kalloni each day on the way to Mytilini, I watched refugees from various regions, countries, and religions—people who had not been slated to know and support each other—care for one another and create community together. I saw people offer elder women of all backgrounds—Sunni, Shiite, or Orthodox Christian, speaking Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, or Somali—places to sit and rest regardless of their language, religion, or sect. What might it mean to find that connection here? What might it mean to make our support of others so widespread, multilingual, and inclusionary that xenos becomes a word that English and Spanish share with Greek? We need new words.

I still wake sometimes not knowing where I am. Since April, I have felt guided by a loving spirit in ways I was not aware of before. Something about the daily witnessing of birth and death—literal and metaphorical—has changed me. I have felt the death of people's old lives as crossing the sea represents a point of no return. I have seen the birth of people's new lives as they step toward the shore, sometimes miraculously, alive, with their babies and small children lifted above their heads. In the months I walked with families in Greece, I felt my body channeling courage that was emanating from the refugees. Courage was all around them like butterflies fluttering in their midst, asking us to stop the bombing, to stop the wars, to refuse to let oceans divide humanity, and to always seek guidance, especially in the shadows before light. §

Thank you to Fred Marchant for your exquisite teaching of poetry.